PITTA

Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 16 Number 5 May 2019

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 26th May 2019: Kasu Brahmananda Reddy (KBR) National Park, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad, 6.00AM.

Spread over 400 acres, this park was originally the Chiran Palace grounds. Easily accessible due to its location in the heart of the city, the KBR Park is a haven for Partridges and Peafowl, and one can expect to see some scrubland birds as well. The lake in the park, and its surrounds, can also throw up some interesting water birds. This will be a half-day trip. We have taken permission from the Forest Department to carry cameras inside KBR Park. However, please ensure that the photographs taken inside KBR are not used for any commercial purpose, or for any monetary benefit or for promotion of any commercial venture.

For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532). As usual, please let her know if you need a lift, and if you can accommodate extra passengers. Non-members are requested to donate Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. Our new T-Shirts and Caps will be available for sale; T-Shirts are Rs. 450/- each and Caps are Rs. 250/-.

Editor's note: Some time back, the 11th edition of the HSBC Hyderabad Bird Race was held at Hyderabad. We bring you 3 different perspectives of the event from some of the participants.

BIRD RACE OR BIRD SAVIOURS?
Report – Hyderabad Bird Race, February 17, 2019

Manideep

The group during the trip (Photo courtesy: Manideep)

I have had fond memories of participation in the Hyderabad Bird Race since 2016. Every time I participate, I learn something new and make new friends. This year was no exception. I was too excited to sleep the previous night. We did not have our own cars. Hence the organizing committee was kind enough to provide us transport. Our great group (Adnan, Mallesh, Manideep, Mahesh, Vivek, Sravani, Tejasri and Vijaya) consisted of three Deccan Birders and five students from Forest College and Research Institute (FCRI).

Our first pitstop was a remote location at Langar Houz nestled amidst thick bushes along the banks of River Musi. The first bird for the day was a Grey Francolin flying right above some scrub. The place looked stunning with hundreds of Baya nests hanging from the trees with background of Golconda Fort. We identified more than 35 species in no time. As the day started to get warmer, we decided to venture to Osman Sagar. Last time I visited this place was four years ago to watch the beautiful Lesser Flamingos late in the evening. Rest of them were visiting Osman Sagar for the first time. The route was so tricky that it reminded us of a maze.

Our team led by experienced birders Adnan and Vivek ensured that each member had sufficient time to get to know details about the birds. After identifying 40 more species for nearly two hours, we were in for a shock. We saw a female Garganey trying hard to fly from the surface of water. As we approached closer to the bird, it started flapping the wings uncontrollably. She was stuck in a fisherman's net right underneath her neck and was fifteen feet away from the shore.

Garganey (Photo: Mallesh)

Mallesh & Mahesh assessing the depth
(Photo: Manideep)

After much discussion and planning, Mahesh and Mallesh from FCRI volunteered to get into the water to rescue the bird. Braving the squishy mud, the duo entered the lake with the support of a long stick which was held by rest of us on the bank.

Mallesh & Mahesh to the rescue
(Photo: Manideep)

As they approached the bird, our anxiety increased watching her panic even more and trying desperately to fly away. The nylon strings were too strong around the bird to be snapped with bare hands.

Garganey with nylon string entangled around its wings
(Photo: Manideep)

At this moment the tiny pencil knife of one of the team members came in handy. She was safely brought to the shore after carefully disentangling the strings.

Checking for injuries (Photo: Manideep)

All of us were so relieved and happy to see her flying away into the sky that, we forgot the squishy mud and the struggle to get her free.

Suddenly we realised that most of the afternoon had gone by. We made a quick dash to Ameenpur Lake and managed to get our final list to 110. We felt so strongly bonded with each other after the rescue that we decided to name Garganey as our bird of the day.

It was a fantastic day with so many beautiful memories and amazing camaraderie between everyone in our team. As we walked around the habitat, it lifted our spirts, as we never knew what we were going to see next.

Watching birds with their delicate wings flying from branch to branch and taking food to their young made us feel one with nature. As I watched the Garganey fly away, I felt like a bird expanding my wings, learning new things and flying high.

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MY EXPERIENCE AT THE HYDERABAD BIRD RACE, 2019

Suharsha Bhaskarla

Hyderabad Bird Race is organised by BSAP & sponsored by HSBC. This was my 2nd bird race, but it was no less exciting than the first one. It was exciting to see groups of eager birders waiting to start the race with their bird books and cameras. Everyone started by 7:00AM from Tourism Plaza to their planned birding spots in & around Hyderabad. The most interesting thing was our team members Abhishek, Raghunathan, Abrar & me were the only 'bikers squad'. Raghu and I planned to cover Osmansagar, Himayatsagar & Kokapet, while Abrar & Abhishek covered Ananthagiri.

Green Bee-eater
(Photo: Ritish Kannayagari)

According to the plan we reached Osmansagar Lake by 8:00AM; on the way we spotted Large Grey Babblers, Spotted, Collared and Laughing Doves, Green Bee-eaters and Black Drongos. A group of Peafowl that perched on cement poles demanded all my attention.

Black Drongo (Photo: Ambika Pradhan)

There was a farm adjacent to the lake & it had a flock of Red-wattled Lapwings, a bevy of Larks, and lots of Pond Herons, Common Snipes & many Pipits. In the whole day of birding what attracted me most was the cloud of Rosy Starlings flying above our heads. There were about 100. From the farm we walked along the banks of the lake. With my binoculars I could spot birds very easily. The lake has population of different species of ducks like Garganeys, Spot-billed Ducks, Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, colonies of Gulls, Ibises, Plovers, Sandpipers and Cormorants.

Wood Sandpiper (Photo: Ritish Kannayagari)

The pink Flamingos with their long necks & long legs kept me rooted there.

While I was in search of warblers my teammate spotted a Eurasian Wryneck, which was a lifer for me. I was very happy to see it. An Indian Nightjar flew right in front of us. We went in search of the Short-eared Owl but unfortunately, we couldn't find it. On our way back we spotted raptors like Steppe Eagle & Osprey.

As we completed birding in Osmansagar we headed to Himayatsagar. Due to hot weather conditions there was not much activity of birds. We spotted Blue-tailed Bee-eaters, Booted Eagle, Black-winged Kite & many water birds. I still remember the Black-winged Kite's striking face, all the time in my mind. I felt like I was talking to it.

From Himayatsagar we went to Kokapet just to spot the Blue Rock Thrush & Rock Chat. Fortunately, we got the Blue Rock Thrush but not the Rock Chat. While searching for these birds I found three Owls on the cliffs. While returning we stopped at Meralam and found Yellow Bitterns over there.

Black-winged Stilt
(Photo: Ritish Kannayagari)

This was my day with beautiful moments and unexpected sightings of birds, leaving me with a satisfied soul – a great day to remember.

My love towards birds will never change.

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ARE COMMON BIRDS STILL COMMON?

Report – Hyderabad Bird Race, February 17, 2019

Dr Barnali Chaudhuri

Asian Paradise-flycatcher (Photo: Umesh Mani)

"I did not notice any house sparrows during the whole day of birding", Sanjeevani, the youngest member of Deccan Birders, wondered after the Hyderabad Bird Race.

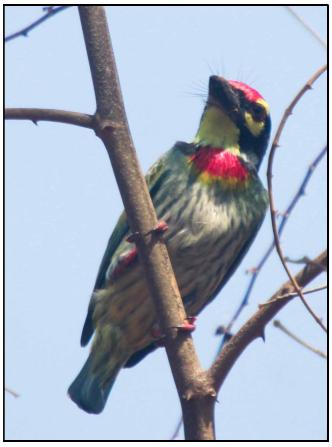
On 17th Feb 2019, we all gathered at the Tourism Plaza at Begumpet at dawn. As the sun rose in the east, lighting up the place, our bird race had already begun. Common (Blue Rock) Pigeons were stationed under the shades of the building. Black Kites soared through the sky canvassing the area for prey.

We were assigned to a group. Each group had four to five members, and the groups were named after bird species like Kingfisher, Bulbul, Swan, etc. I was a part of "Hawks" along with Ambika, Ritish (our Captain), and Dhruva. After the ceremonial waving of the flag from the Plaza, we were on our way to Ananthagiri hills. En route, we saw raptors gliding in the sky. One of them was a Greater Spotted Eagle. A Black-winged Kite perched on a wire. Red-vented Bulbuls were everywhere. Ambika listed the birds as we progressed towards our first destination. The game was on.

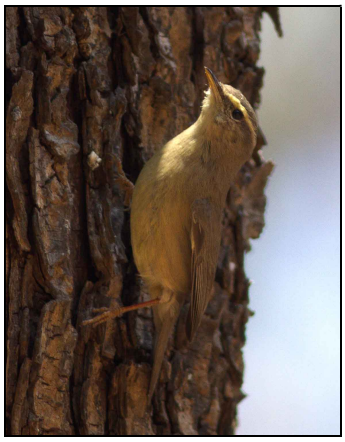
Short-toed Snake Eagle
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

We reached Ananthagiri hills. A forest guard tried to stop us from entering the forest since it was banned for general public, but we had special permission. Upon entering the forest, we were greeted by a male Asian Paradise-flycatcher flashing its long white tail. It was so beautiful – I couldn't take my eyes off it! It hopped from one branch to another, posing perfectly for pictures. We saw a Jerdon's Leafbird beside the Paradise-flycatcher.

As we proceeded further into the forest, we noticed a Jungle Nightjar sitting quietly on the branch of a big tree. We spotted another one on a tree nearby. A Tickell's Blue Flycatcher justified its name with its beautiful blue colour.



Coppersmith Barbet
(Photo: Ambika Pradhan)



Sulphur-bellied Warbler
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

We also found a Coppersmith Barbet showing off its awesome colour combinations. Mother Nature has painted it with her own brush, creating a spectacular combination of colours which seems impossible to replicate. On our way back from the forest, we observed a spotted deer that seemed to ignore our existence entirely.

Jungle Nightjar (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Rufous-tailed Lark (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Common Tailorbird (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Sykes's Lark (Photo: Umesh Mani)

By 12:45PM we had decided upon our next destination - Osmansagar reservoir, popularly known as Gandipet. Coincidentally, the security here wasn't welcoming either. So we took a *kuchcha* road to get to the reservoir. Gandipet gave us the perfect opportunity to observe several species of wetland birds along with some forest birds.

Indian Silverbill (Photo: Umesh Mani)

A flock of Indian Silverbills were in flight. One Little Ringed Plover was nesting on the mudflat of the reservoir. The bird looked like a cap on its own nest. Pipits and Larks were feeding on the field camouflaging with the surroundings perfectly.

After having dried its feathers, a Black Drongo chased its prey. A White-breasted Kingfisher was patiently waiting to get hold of its next catch of the day.

Twelve adult Greater Flamingos were a bit too far away from us, but four juveniles had stationed themselves in the shallow water, close enough for us to get a good look. I wonder why the flock was split that way in the same lake. A Common Greenshank roamed near the shore, seemingly aimlessly. Cormorants rested on a rock island inside the Osmansagar Lake.

Small Pratincole (Photo: Ritish Kannayagari)

Black-winged Stilts strutted around in the shallow water along with Common and Wood Sandpipers. The bigger birds – Grey Heron, Pond Heron and Purple Heron made their presence known there along with egrets. Spot-billed Ducks seemed to enjoy the cool water as the sun rose further up in the sky. Black-tailed Godwits were filling their stomachs with the help of their long beaks. Common Coots, exhibiting white *tilaks* on their heads were swimming happily in the water. A little Green Bee-eater posed for its own personal photoshoot. The Glossy Ibis stayed true to its name showing off its velvety texture in the sunlight. A flock of Bar-headed Geese were about to dive in the water.

Little Stint (Photo: Ritish Kannayagari)

I was enjoying the nature along with bird songs throughout the day. But alas, soon it was time to go back. On our way back from Osmansagar, we spotted an Indian Roller perched on a wire. Before we knew it, we were back to the venue for the evening function. Our bird race had come to an end, but not before dinner was served.

Black-rumped Flameback (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Common Iora (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Hyderabad Bird Race 2019 witnessed many first-time birders. Many youngsters and children had participated in the Bird Race with the ultimate goal of getting a little closer to nature while enriching their experiences with birds. The Bird Race is meant to kindle the curiosity of the general public in nature. Everybody shared their experiences during the day. They were interested, not only in birds, but also their habitats. Birding is a very good medium to inculcate love for nature. Nature has done a beautiful job of creating stunning colours through a masterstroke we call birds. We cannot afford to destroy their home. Thanks to the parents who introduce their kids to nature through something fun like a Bird Race at such a young age. Once kids start loving nature, they cannot let it be destroyed in front of their eyes. If we can inculcate a love for nature in their young minds, we can rest assured that Earth lies in safe hands. Making youngsters aware of the value of nature is probably the most crucial step towards protecting the world from humans who wilfully destroy wildlife habitats for personal profit.

Once-common House Sparrows are not common anymore and the number of common bird sightings keep dwindling every day. Our team, Hawks, saw more than 150 species and was declared the winner of the Hyderabad Bird Race 2019.

Though we were happy at receiving the prize, we were also deeply saddened by accelerated urbanization that poses a direct threat to the birds we saw that day. We had to really search for birds even in habitats like Ananthagiri Hills. Counts for already established flocks have been at an all-time low.

This is alarming. Nature is resilient but she can only take so much abuse. It is high time for our government to take firm steps to conserve nature effectively. The use of plastic has to be strictly regulated. We noticed plastic bottles and bags almost every step of our way. There is enough pollution in our lakes to clog natural flow, and our animals and birds are eating plastic without even realizing it. It is a sad state of affairs. A ban on single use plastic must be considered under such dire circumstances. Deforestation in the name of urban and rural development must stop. The erection of concrete jungles will never make up for the destruction of natural habitats in the long run, socially or economically. We have to become environmentally accountable for our actions.

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Photo: Ambika Pradhan)

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THE BUZZ OF THE CICADA

Sudhir Moorti

Cicada (Photo: Gurukumar KR)

I have been birding in different kinds of forests in India for almost 15 years now, and my experience has taught me that birding in forests takes a lot of patience and can be quite frustrating. At times I have wandered for kilometres without encountering a single bird and suddenly there is a frenzy of activity, known as a 'Hunting Party', that descends into the trees. So, while birding in the forests, I learnt to make a few mental notes on how to locate birds. Usually I follow the calls but there are some other indicators which I find reliable, one such indicator being cicadas.

The cicadas are a super family of large oval-shaped, winged insects with over 3000 species worldwide and about 250 species found in India. They are well known for their 'call' which reverberates through the forest. The buzzing sound they make is a mating call produced by a complex sound-making mechanism.

Cicadas live most of their life underground and emerge only for a few weeks to a few months at the most. There are two types of cicadas – the annual cicadas and periodical cicadas. The annual cicadas emerge at a particular time every year, whereas the periodical cicadas emerge once every *x* number of years, which is a constant and mostly a prime number, and which can be as high as 17 years in some species.

Cicadas are herbivores – they eat vegetable matter. Young cicadas or Nymphs eat/drink liquid from plant roots, while moulting cicadas eat twigs and adult cicadas do not feed at all!

The cicadas are very mysterious; it is still not known how they keep count pf the months and years to emerge at exactly the same standard time/interval.

A few years ago, I made an interesting observation while walking through the forest – if there are some pockets of woods where a group of cicadas is calling (called a 'chorus'), astonishingly these pockets are totally devoid of birds. For years I have been checking and re-checking this phenomenon, and have found that it never fails – wherever the cicadas are calling, I couldn't find a single bird. I alerted my fellow birders to this fact and they also seemed to agree...

There were times when, the forest on one side was abuzz with cicada calls, and there was no sign of birds, while on the other side of the forest, where cicadas were not calling, there was plenty of bird activity.

This certainly baffled me; the cicadas are not toxic to birds. How are they able to drive the birds away?

Noted ornithologist Walter Koenig, who has been studying this phenomenon for quite some time, suspects that cicadas and birds mutually influence each other's populations, but we still don't know how. While Koenig's research is focussed on the periodical cicadas, I feel that this is not just applicable to the periodical cicadas, but that birds don't venture into the areas where cicadas are present for some reason. Are the cicadas, which feed on liquid from the tree roots, able to introduce some sort of bird-repelling chemical into the tree's system? Wild speculation? Maybe not.

The fact remains that similar observations have been made by birders globally and there is something going on between the cicadas and the birds. Meanwhile, when birding if you hit a patch with cicadas in chorus...may as well move on, you're not likely to find a single bird.

References

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2. Anonymous. 2019. *Web Resources On Indian Cicadas*. In Marathe, K., V. Sarkar, B. W. Price, P. Roy, and K. Kunte. *Cicadas of India, V. 1*. Indian Foundation for Butterflies.
3. Sarkar, Vivek, 2015, How to study Cicadas in the field – A manual to study Cicadas

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Trip Report – Pocharam, February 24, 2019

Dr Jayati Mitra

The group (Photo courtesy: Sudipta Bhattacharya)

Every year Deccan Birders usually arranges a field trip to ICRISAT campus in the month of February and this year also we were looking forward to it, but there was a change. A leopard was lurking around the said campus and so, for security reasons, our venue was shifted to Pocharam. It was indeed a good alternative because this place has a vast forest area with rocks and a water body as well – an ideal habitat for all types of birds.

Red Collared Dove (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

On our way we had to pass through Narsapur forest but it was a dismal sight. Our favourite birding spot near the temple was denuded of all forest cover, and instead of sweet birdsong we could hear the thunderous noise of a ball mill set up right amidst the jungle.

The small lake had also dried up and the surrounding area consisted of dry, parched land with a few burnt tree stumps standing haphazardly in between the areas marked for civic work.

The only heartening sight was that of a red silk cotton tree in full bloom at the corner of the road, which provided shelter to a flock of chirping Brahminy Starlings. A few Indian Robins were still seen around the place which was once home to colourful Woodpeckers, Minivets, Kingfishers and so many other avian species.

Brahminy Starling (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

Common Woodshrike
(Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

We left the place with a heavy heart and moved forward but the development all along the way was so bewildering that we were unable to recognise the familiar landmarks and overshot by almost ten kilometres before realising our mistake. We reached Pocharam at last, pretty late around ten in the morning, but some Small Minivets and Purple Sunbirds were still active and feeding. A male Asian Paradise-flycatcher with its long white streamers, was an eye-catching sight.

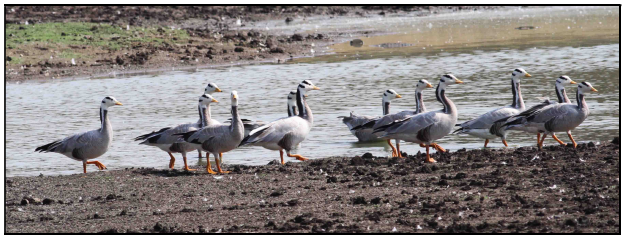
Blyth's Reed Warbler (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

Some of the birders sat down under a tree to rest and have breakfast while some others continued birding around the area. There was a small puddle across the fence where quite a few birds came to quench their thirst. We saw a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Red-winged Bushlark, Black Drongo, Rufous Treepie, Green Bee-eater to name a few. A Large Cuckooshrike moved surreptitiously amidst the dense foliage of the age-old trees.

Large Cuckooshrike (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

Thereafter, we left for a visit to the lake around noon. A group of Large Grey Babblers were chattering continuously as we walked towards the shore. The water level had receded in the recent past, thus exposing a large portion of the bed of the lake. A pair of Glossy Ibises were visible at the far bank. There were a few other species foraging in flocks on the dry bed, like Small Pratincole, Little Ringed Plover and Kentish Plover. Paddyfield Pipits, Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks and Yellow Wagtails were also seen moving around restlessly on the ground.

Little Ringed Plover (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)



Bar-headed Geese (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

A flock of about twenty-five Bar-headed Geese maintained a safe distance from us as they rested on the far end of the lake. Brown-headed Gulls were also present around them. It was difficult to cross over the marsh to see a flock of Terns clearly from this end, but we could observe the ones which were flying overhead, and amidst them a Black-bellied Tern was conspicuous. The majority were River and Whiskered Terns.

Black-bellied Tern (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

The swimming ducks were mostly Eurasian Wigeons and a few Garganeys and Northern Shovelers. Waders such as Common, Wood, Green and Marsh Sandpipers and a few Black-winged Stilts were feeding at the edge of the lake. It was immensely satisfying to spot the majestic pink birds - the Greater Flamingos at the far end.

Marsh Sandpiper (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

Green Sandpiper (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

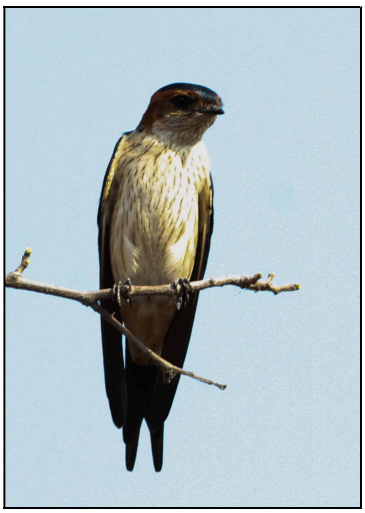
After spending some time here we went towards the other end of the lake, where stood a century old dilapidated building called '*bhoot bangla'*. It was a shady place and the air was filled with the sweet fragrance of frangipani. On the edge of a jutting rock a Common Kingfisher sat motionless for a while. It was fully focused on catching its prey and we relished the whole action till it finally dived and rose from the water proudly displaying its catch of a big fish between its beak.

Greater Flamingo (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

It was past noon by now and there was another interesting sighting - a bigger group of Greater Flamingos that were moving on this side of the lake. We saw sixteen of them, feeding quietly.

Temminck's Stint (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

We spent about half an hour here enjoying the sightings and slowly, one by one, all of us dispersed, hoping to meet again soon in future for happy birding moments.



Red-rumped Swallow
(Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

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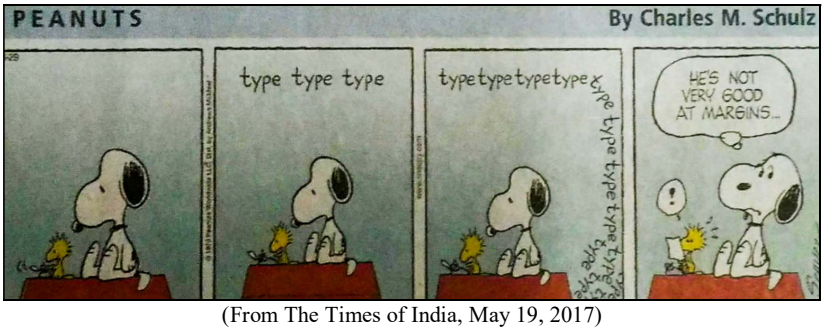
Bird Humour

Umesh Mani



(From The Times of India, May 19, 2017)

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos nanus*)

Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker (Narsapur, February 8, 2009)

Order: Piciformes
Family: Picidae
Genus: *Dendrocopos*
Species: *D. nanus*
Size: 13 cm

Description & distribution: The Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, also known as the Indian Pygmy Woodpecker, is seen across almost all of India, Bangladesh, the Himalayan foothills of Nepal and Sikkim, and Sri Lanka. It is a small pied woodpecker with a light brown crown and mantle, darker brown and white barring on upperparts and dusky white underparts with faint brown vertical streaking. It has a distinct white stripe starting from the eye and going down the side of the neck, and a crimson streak on the sides of the hind crown, which is lacking in the female. The irises are white and rimmed with pink. The throat is streaked with brown, and the central tail feathers are white-spotted, a feature that distinguishes it from the otherwise very similar Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker.

The Sri Lankan sub-species, *D. n. gymopthalmus*, has a darker crown, concolorous with the upperparts, and the underparts are whiter and almost unstreaked. Some authors describe *D. n. cinereigula* of the South-western peninsula as an intermediate.

Some taxonomic authorities have placed the Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker in genus *Yungipicus* or genus *Picoides*.

Habitat & behaviour: The Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker is generally seen in singly or in pairs, in groves, deciduous and semi-evergreen forests, lightly wooded open country and secondary growth. It also often associates with mixed hunting parties of other small bird species. The call is a rapid metallic rattle, or a feeble *click-r-r-r* used as a contact note between the pair. It feeds on the stems of saplings close to ground, as well as higher up in the thinner branches and end-twigs of trees. It tends to run jerkily up and down and around trees, as agilely as the Nuthatches, before flying across to another nearby treetop. Its diet consists of insects, flower nectar, and soft pulp of berries and banyan and *peepal* figs.

Nesting: The Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker breeds mainly between February and April, with some local variations in parts of its range. The nest is usually a natural hollow in a rotten branch, or in a hole excavated by the birds themselves. The usual clutch consists of 2-3 blunt oval-shaped glossy white eggs.

Local name: The Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker is known as *'Chhota kathphodwa'* in Hindi, '*Chitta suruti pachhi'* in Telugu, *'Siru maramkotti'* in Tamil, '*Bharati (or bharatiya) nano lakkad-khod*' in Gujarati and '*Chhota sutaar*' in Marathi.

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For Private Circulation Only
Editors: Shanti Mani, Umesh Mani **Email:** bsap.pitta@gmail.com

For information, write to: Deccan Birders, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/bsap_online. **Website:** www.bsap.in. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*